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# From Lega Nord to Lega: Matteo Salvini and the rise of far-right nativist Lega

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From Lega Nord to Lega:

Matteo Salvini and the Rise of Far-Right Nativist Lega

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## **Thesis Introduction:**

Relatively recent status quo changing events within Europe (i.e. the Great Recession, the Eurozone Crisis, the Refugee Crisis, etc.) have created political rumblings which have threatened to overthrow established European governments. More specifically, this threat has been and is the current rise of European far right nationalist populist parties. These parties generally represent themselves as direct political and ideological opposition to the current governing body, and although there have been multiple occurrences when it comes to the rise of European far right nationalist parties, there is one case in particular that will act as a case study: The development of Italy's modern day Lega party. Lega serves as a perfect and unique case study due to the multitude of approaches a right wing populist party can take. For example, the source of right wing populism can range from that of nationalism, to nativist, to regionalist, etc. Because of Lega Nord's historical development, where the party began first as a regionalist populist party but then transitioned towards a more conventional European far right nationalist party, this case study allows one to analyze a multifaceted perspective of right wing populism.

With the case study of Lega Nord however, there is one facet that must and will be addressed throughout this thesis: the **personality** that these far right nationalist populist parties tend to project. More specifically, this personality is one that resonates with a disgruntled constituency that sees itself, rightly so at times, victimized by the current governing/ruling body. In the case of Lega Nord, the focus on who exactly are the ruling establishment actually shifts from the alleged Mezzorgiono-aligned Italian government, to the European Union. In addition to this, it must also be mentioned that this shift in antagonistic focus is actually concurrent with that of the party transformation from Lega Nord to Lega.

Finally, in regards to the aforementioned personality of these far right populist parties, a crucial component is of course the figureheads/leaders of these parties. A charismatic and effective leader can propel a party's messaging to new heights and expand the party's base to an even greater constituency. This is exactly the case when observing the leader of Lega: Matteo Salvini. Matteo Salvini, with both his charisma and 'man of the people' demeanor that he portrays on social media, has been able to expand Lega's umbrella towards the southern region of Italy, something once unimaginable during the time of Lega Nord. With all this being said however, before this thesis can begin to cover the specifics of this case study it is important to understand some of the fundamentals when it comes to populism and its application to a European far right ideology.

### **What is Populism?**

In order to properly analyze Lega Nord's development into Lega, we have to define what exactly is the European far right populism that these parties have used. The definition of what constitutes a European far right populist party is key to understanding just how they have been able to consolidate power within their own respective political arenas. Admittedly, the question of defining populism is complex and there are variations in both its application and definition. Is populism defined by its associated special organizations and characteristics (i.e. "assault on institutions, charismatic leadership, etc."<sup>1</sup>)? Or is populism ideational, best defined by the central ideology it advocates? Within these contrasting definitions there exists an overlap which allows one to observe the most fundamental pillar of populism, one that will be used for the purposes of this thesis as its general identification. This fundamental pillar being the idea that society is

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<sup>1</sup> Takis S. Pappas, "Populists in Power," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (2019): 70–84, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0026>.

inherently broken up into two distinctive groups: ‘the people (us)’ vs. ‘the elite (them)’. This foundation is highlighted by the works of Cas Mudde, Takis Pappas, Catherine Fieschi, and Benjamin Moffitt.

In his piece ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, Cas Mudde claims that the inherent philosophy of populism is rooted in a realm of dichotomy. This dichotomy “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ and that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”<sup>2</sup> This expression of the general will, in the inherent view of populism, is morally and intellectually superior to that of the elite. Thus, there constitutes a collection of power and influence not within the elite, but rather within the will of the majority. Takis Pappas, while arguing that special organizations define populism in his ‘Populists in Power’ article, similarly claims populism “holds that society is split by a single overriding cleavage between the vast majority and a tiny elite, and that this cleavage is unbridgeable.”<sup>3</sup> Takis Pappas goes one step further and attributes four interrelated and key characteristics: “1). a reliance on extraordinary charismatic leadership, 2) the ceaseless, strategic pursuit of political polarization, 3) a drive to seize control of state, and 4) the systematic use of patronage to reward supporters and crowd out the opposition.”<sup>4</sup> All of these will play a key role in clarifying what is and *is not* considered populism later in this introduction.

Catherine Fieschi in her piece ‘Populocracy: The Tyranny of Authenticity and the Rise of Populism’, describes European populism being associated with three main concepts:

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<sup>2</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

<sup>3</sup> Pappas, “Populists in Power.”

<sup>4</sup> Pappas, “Populists in Power.”

“a divide between the people and the elite... [the second concept being] a betrayal by an elite, typically one that has a greater sense of allegiance to its own members than to the people or the nation... [and the third] is authenticity, [meaning] a politics rooted in instinct, rather than reason, ‘the politics of the gut.’”<sup>5</sup>

The final point in particular is noteworthy because ‘the politics of the gut’ is indeed both a conceptual and pragmatic trait that is exhibited by a number of populist leaders. This type of ‘politic’ allows one to “dismiss opponents as hypocrites and provides license to speak one’s mind without limits, to be direct to the point of shamelessness.”<sup>6</sup> Such a direct approach is integral to the discourse populists engage in and will be analyzed further in depth.

Finally, Benjamin Moffitt provides an interesting angle to what constitutes populism in his piece ‘The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political style, and Representation.’ Here Moffitt diverges from the typical perspective of populism being a sort of fixed ideology, strategy, discourse, or political logic. Rather, the argument is that contemporary populism has manifested itself into more of a “political *style* that is used by a wide range of actors across the world today. This approach stresses the performative aspects of populism and contextualizes populism’s position in the heavily mediatized and ‘stylized’ milieu of contemporary politics.”<sup>7</sup> Such a focus on the *style* of populism is integral to understanding the effects it has on the recipients of populist discourse.

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<sup>5</sup> Ben Hall, “Populocracy: The Tyranny of Authenticity and the Rise of POPULISM, by Catherine Fieschi,” July 15, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/9b89b9be-a49b-11e9-a282-2df48f366f7d>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 28.

Within these definitions there exists an overlap which allows one to observe the most fundamental pillar of populism: this notion of ‘us vs them’ (us being the people, and them being the elites) which transcends political labels. Populism acts as a thin-centered ideology that “can be easily combined with very different other ideologies, including communism, nationalism or socialism.”<sup>8</sup> An ideology that is personalized and enhanced with the presence of a charismatic leader who can serve as a focal point for the goals of their respective party. These goals usually translate into attacks on liberal institutions, play into the narrative of patronage politics, and serve to vilify the political and ideological opposition.

Even with this overarching label however, due to the ‘flexible’ application of populism there is still a certain question that remains: who constitutes ‘the people’ and ‘the elite?’ The answer lies in the fact that modern populism is inherently **context-dependent**. More specifically, populism will define the people and the elite of a society based on who and what is the existing institutional power and the values within said society. The far right in particular is culpable when it comes to utilizing the context-dependent nature of populism to further propagate its agenda. Because of this, populism will be examined through the lenses of the European far right and the common/conventional exclusionary politics that are used.

### **European Nationalist Populism on the Far-Right & Regionalist Application**

One defining aspect when it comes to populism, as previously mentioned, is that as a thin-centered ideology it can be seen as a tool with flexible utility. Two particular ‘utilizations’ that will have to be observed before delving into this thesis’ case study are as follows: European far-right populism (with its common association to nationalism) and its possible application to

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<sup>8</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.



regionalism. European far-right populism, while rooted in the aforementioned foundation of populism, has a number of defining characteristics which set it apart. Arguably, the most impactful of these is how common populist rhetoric is intertwined with the traditional framework of the European far right.

It is essential to briefly contrast the populist far right and the traditional far right, in order to understand how populist ideals distinguishes its' approach to the far right. When observing the traditional far right, it is apparent that its foundational ideology is based in absolutism. This absolutism views that society should be, and is in fact, homogeneous in nature; thus, the traditional far right champions theories of exclusivism, nativism, nationalism, and a rejection of globalism. Where the difference lies between the traditional far right and the populist far right is the opportunistic and flexible nature that the populist far right can take. Again, this harkens back to the thin ideological framework of populism, where context dependency can morph the messaging of the respective far right populist actor.

The connection between the traditional far right and the populist far right is with “the central populist frames (the people versus the elite) with the extreme right definition of the ‘us’ and the ‘them’, using a more traditional frame of the extreme right.”<sup>9</sup> It is in this definition of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ where one can begin to analyze what distinguishes subsets of populist parties

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<sup>9</sup> D. Della Porta, “Extreme Right and Populism: A Frame Analysis of Extreme Right Wing Discourses in Italy and Germany. IHS Political Science Series No. 121, July 2010,” Academia.edu, accessed March 7, 2021, [https://www.academia.edu/21696465/Extreme\\_Right\\_and\\_Populism\\_A\\_Frame\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Extreme\\_Right\\_Wing\\_Discourses\\_in\\_Italy\\_and\\_Germany\\_IHS\\_Political\\_Science\\_Series\\_No\\_121\\_July\\_2010](https://www.academia.edu/21696465/Extreme_Right_and_Populism_A_Frame_Analysis_of_Extreme_Right_Wing_Discourses_in_Italy_and_Germany_IHS_Political_Science_Series_No_121_July_2010).

from one another, in this case nationalist to regionalist. The most common form of populism that is used by the European far right is that which embraces a nationalist agenda.

Nationalism emphasizes the prioritization of the nation by not only the people, but more importantly the state and its institutions. Much of the typical far right European parties, such as the National Rally in France or the AfD in Germany, utilize what can be best described as a subset of nationalism: nativism. Nativism is centered around the combination of nationalism “with xenophobia in that it calls for States to be comprised of only members of the native group and considers non-native elements to be fundamentally threatening to the monocultural nation-state.”<sup>10</sup> Such nativist tendencies by European Far Right parties tend to take an ethno-pluralist perspective, where any different culture is considered equal, “but distinct and thus incompatible... [they] celebrate cultural differences and argue that these differences must be protected from things like mass migration, cultural imperialism, and one-worldism.”<sup>11</sup> This is characteristic of the rising far right European nationalist parties, including Lega, who have consistently thrown attacks on liberal, globalized institutions and mass migration.

While on one side of the populist coin there is a nationalist application, for the purpose of this thesis the other side of the coin can show its regionalist counterpart. Regionalism is inherently an ideology that is founded off of the notion of ‘territory’. That is, regionalism looks to prioritize a government for and by the respective region, and hence the sovereignty of said region. From regionalism comes regionalist parties, like Lega Nord, that

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<sup>10</sup> Matt Golder, “Far Right Parties in Europe,” SSRN, May 13, 2016, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2779558](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2779558).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

“demand more regional power. [They] are neither organized on a nation-wide scale nor do they possess the ambition to represent the interests and people over, of and in the whole territory of a country. Regionalist parties are organized exclusively on a regional basis and aim to cater for a regional electorate only.”<sup>12</sup>

Having this context, one can now begin to see that when populism is intermingled with regionalism there is a complement between regionalism and the common anti-system, anti-elite populist rhetoric. This complement between characteristics is achieved mainly through what was mentioned previously: an effective identification of an ‘elite’ that serves as a counterpart to the ‘people or **region**’. To quickly exemplify this, the Lega Nord drew a dichotomy between themselves (Padania) and “the political and cultural elites running the country (to the benefit of the South)... [where] northern Italians could still save themselves, by regaining control.”<sup>13</sup> Where of course Padania is portrayed as the people, and the South and political establishment is painted as the elite. This served to enhance the regionalist ideology to an effective degree.

Admittedly, there is some debate as to whether regionalist parties can fit under the populist label. For example, political scientists such as Takis Pappas argue that true modern populism is that which holds power and serve as a true foil to liberal democracy and democratically liberal institutions. As mentioned previously, Pappas believed that for modern populism to be characterized as such they must look to “seize control of the state, emasculate

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<sup>12</sup> Oscar Mazzoleni and Sean Mueller, “Regionalist Parties in Western Europe: Dimensions of Success,” Routledge & CRC Press (Taylor & Francis Group), accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.routledge.com/Regionalist-Parties-in-Western-Europe-Dimensions-of-Success/Mazzoleni-Mueller/p/book/9781472477545>.

<sup>13</sup> Daniele Albertazzi, “No Regionalism Please, We Are Leghisti!’ The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini,” Taylor & Francis, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13597566.2018.1512977>.

liberal institutions, and impose an illiberal constitution.”<sup>14</sup> This would seem at odds with the regionalist ideology, and hence contradict the labeling of the Lega Nord as a populist party. However, rather than defining populism through a conditionality of power, it has to be acknowledged that “populism is *always* partially constituted by aspects of the environment in which it finds itself.”<sup>15</sup> Populism is **not** defined by its attainment and maintaining of power, but rather by the previously discussed inherent characteristics. Yes, its priorities as to who is the enemy and ally may change over time as the political environment around it changes. But the inherent, defining characteristic of populism (i.e. charismatic leadership, rhetoric, us vs. them, etc.) remains.

Having analyzed these definitions, one thing is certain: European far right populism has manifested itself into a platform that is commonly empowered through its opposition to “mass immigration, cultural liberalization, and the perceived surrender of national sovereignty to distant and unresponsive international bodies.”<sup>16</sup> And this is exactly the case we see with Lega Nord and the eventually formed Lega, the former who practiced regionalist populism and the latter being the transitioned nationalist populist party. We can now begin to answer the fundamental puzzle this thesis presents: how exactly was a far right **regionalist** party able to not only transition, but arguably also politically elevate itself, towards a more conventional European far right **nationalist** party.

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<sup>14</sup> Pappas, “Populists in Power.”

<sup>15</sup> Duncan McDonnell, “A Weekend in Padania: Regionalist Populism and the Lega Nord - Duncan McDonnell, 2006,” SAGE Journals, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2006.00259.x>.

<sup>16</sup> William A. Galston, “The Rise of European Populism and the Collapse of the Center-Left,” *Brookings* (blog), November 30, 1AD, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/08/the-rise-of-european-populism-and-the-collapse-of-the-center-left/>.

## **Broad Overview of Lega Nord and Lega:**

The Lega was formerly known as the Lega Nord, whose prior platform focused heavily, if not exclusively, on a regionalist agenda – one that sought to protect and prioritize the Padania’s (Northern Italy and parts of Central Italy) interests and potential from their southern counterparts (The Mezzogiorno). The Lega Nord eventually underwent some changes in scope and ideological focus. Arguably the first prominent shift was when Umberto Bossi, head of the Lega Nord, formed an alliance with Silvio Berlusconi, a prominent Italian politician and media figure. This was done in order to establish a governmental centre-right coalition between the Lega Nord and Berlusconi’s Forza Italia. Now while the alliance had obvious political benefits, the true significance lies in the effect it had on the Lega Nord’s ideological foundation. The alliance saw Bossi slowly shift the Lega Nord’s philosophy of “secessionism with federalism, though it never abandoned its regional roots or its formal pledge to lead its home area out of the Italian Republic.”<sup>17</sup>

If there is any clear turning point in the Lega Nord’s philosophy it is with the appointment of Matteo Salvini after the resignation of Umberto Bossi (and a brief stint by Roberto Maroni) as Federal Secretary of the Lega Nord. Salvini’s victory in the closed primary elections can be seen as “the natural result of a process of party renovation, both in generational and ideological terms which was perhaps inevitable in order to turn the page.”<sup>18</sup> This party

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<sup>17</sup> Roberto D’Alimonte, “How the Populists Won in Italy,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 114–27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0009>.

<sup>18</sup> Michelangelo Vercesi, “Owner Parties and Party Institutionalisation in Italy: Is the Northern League Exceptional?,” Academia.edu, accessed March 7, 2021, [https://www.academia.edu/11710739/Owner\\_Parties\\_and\\_Party\\_Institutionalisation\\_in\\_Italy\\_Is\\_the\\_Northern\\_League\\_Exceptional](https://www.academia.edu/11710739/Owner_Parties_and_Party_Institutionalisation_in_Italy_Is_the_Northern_League_Exceptional).

renovation began to distance the Lega Nord from its anti-southern rhetoric. Salvini demonstrated this in 2014 with his public apologies for comments he made throughout his political career that targeted the Mezzogiorno, claiming that he will prioritize Italy as a *nation*. This prioritization of course would focus on protecting Italy from total collapse and abuse. But who exactly did Salvini, and in turn the Lega Nord, accuse of seeking Italy's destruction? This question would lead to the beginning of Salvini's transformation of the party from "a northern league into a national league... [where] patriotism replaced regionalism, and Italy replaced Padania."<sup>19</sup> Salvini tapped into the aforementioned 'us vs them' populist mentality and expanded its scope to the point where he accused the EU of being the biggest threat to Italians. He argued that "even if it could go it alone, the North would still be the victim of regulations imposed by a 'totalitarian' EU and would also have to use a currency allegedly set up to advantage the German economy: the Euro."<sup>20</sup> The vilification of the EU gave Salvini the political capabilities to draw the party's ire away from Rome and towards Brussels, in conjunction with security focused rhetoric as shown with Salvini's increased focus on national issues. This is seen with increased mentions of "security, fear of crime, and immigration in the party's political agenda... [resulting in] working-class and low-education voters to support the nationalist] populist messages and anti-globalization that the Lega Nord aimed to monopolize."<sup>21</sup> These changes of direction allowed Salvini to begin pursuing an expansion of the Lega Nord's electorate base and power, as well as show the distinguishing facets of national populism. Not only that, but Salvini began to exhibit

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<sup>19</sup> D'Alimonte, "How the Populists Won in Italy."

<sup>20</sup> Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini, and Antonella Seddone, "'No Regionalism Please, We Are Leghisti!': The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini," *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (n.d.): 645.

<sup>21</sup> Gianluca Passarelli and Dario Tuorto, "The Lega Nord Goes South: The Electoral Advance in Emilia-Romagna: A New Territorial Model?," *Political Geography* 31, no. 7 (September 1, 2012): 419–28, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2012.08.002>.

the common nativist-ethno-pluralist traits of an up and coming far right European populist party. Such a transition from regionalist to nationalist provides the opportunity to observe discrepancies and comparisons between these two approaches to populism.

### **The Essential Question and Approach:**

The answer as to how regionalist-centric Lega Nord transitioned into nationalist nativist Lega lies in three main elements that will be both qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed. The first element is the vacuum of political and ideological direction within Lega Nord due to scandal and party degradation. The second component correlates with the use of the aforementioned ‘us vs them’ mentality that is all too common within European populism. More specifically, the use of Eurosceptic and xenophobic rhetoric that was sparked by the aforementioned influx of immigration and the consequential platform that was provided to charismatic leaders such as Matteo Salvini. Such charismatic leadership has created a direct relationship between Salvini and his supporters which has only served to galvanize Lega’s influence. The third and final element relates to Salvini’s particular savviness on social media in order to expand the aforementioned rhetoric. Observing and analyzing these three components will coalesce into answering the question as to how a regionalist populist party transitioned into a nationalist populist party, and begin to answer the bigger question as to the nature of what exactly populism is.

## **The Lega Nord**

In order to properly engage with the aforementioned essential question of this thesis, the following section will be dedicated to analyzing the history of the Lega Nord. For the purposes of this thesis, this historical analysis will address the birth and rise of the Lega Nord, along with its evolution as a populist power. Such an analysis will provide essential context needed to answer crucial questions throughout this thesis. One such question is how exactly was a far right **regionalist** populist party able to not only transition, but arguably also politically elevate itself, towards a more conventional European far right **nationalist** party?

### **Southernization of the Democratic Christian Party**

The precursor to the Lega Nord was what can best be described as a decentralized collection of six regionalist focused political coalitions who claimed to represent their respective regions of Northern and North-Central Italy. These coalitions included the Liga Veneta (Based in the Veneto region), Lega Lombarda (Based in the Lombardy region), Unione Ligure (Based in the Liguria region), Lega Emiliano-Romagnola (Based in the Northern Emilian region), Alleanza Toscana (Based in the Tuscany region), and Piedmont Autonomista (Based in the Piedmont region). The rise of these regional leagues was mainly a response to the number of both socio-economic and political developments that Italy underwent in the 1970s and 80s. These developments mainly included an increasing alienation felt by businesses and citizens, of Northern and North-east Italy, from the mainstream Christian Democratic Party (DC). During this period, the DC underwent what was known as *meridionalizzazione* (“southernization”) where the political party sought to enhance and consolidate southern support in order to maintain political power.



This process of Southernization “antagonized voters, especially those located in former Christian Democratic strongholds within the Third Italy.... the Veneto and eastern Lombardy, regions that would become Lega strongholds, felt particularly alienated from the party.”<sup>22</sup> This political and socio-economic alienation of Northern voters allowed for the first of the aforementioned leagues to electorally rise. For example, the Liga Veneta’s gain of 4.2% of the vote in the Veneto region demonstrated that:

“there were latent forces within civil society that could be mobilized with the correct political message, charismatic leadership, and adequate organization... resentment towards the state resulted in demands for regional autonomy, articulated through an affirmation of local dialects and culture.”<sup>23</sup>

This building resentment was focused within the lower middle class, small businesses, and the self-employed. Such resentment translated into electoral support for these aforementioned leagues, especially for the rising Lega Lombarda party and its leader Umberto Bossi.

### **Lega Lombarda and Umberto Bossi**

The Lega Lombarda party in particular played a critical role in the formation of the Lega Nord. Prior to the creation of the Lega Nord, the Lega Lombarda party had slowly been gaining political traction both in the Italian government and the EU. In 1987, under leader Umberto Bossi, the Lega Lombarda “captured seats in the national legislature and installed Bossi as senator. [Just] two years later the Lega Lombarda won representation in the European

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<sup>22</sup> Andrej Zaslove, *The Re-Invention of the European Radical Right: Populism, Regionalism, and the Italian Lega Nord* (Montreal, CANADA: MQUP, 2011), 55

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 55

Parliament.”<sup>24</sup> These political victories and clout empowered Bossi and his party. Furthermore, parallel to the Lega Lombarda’s rise came also the success of other regionalist league parties such as the Piemont Autonomista. These victories eventually resulted in Bossi “coalesce[ing] the other regionalist parties in northern Italy into a federated party structure that took the name Lega Nord (Northern League).”<sup>25</sup>

With a Northern League established, regionalist interests were able to effectively undertake political and governmental mobilization in both the Italian and European legislature. This is seen with Bossi’s election to Italy’s Chamber of Deputies in 1992, which in turn resulted in greater party membership and eventually the Lega Nord becoming the second largest party in Northern Italy in 1992.<sup>26</sup> Much of this success is attributable to two factors: the leadership/personality of Bossi, and the regionalist ideological base of the party.

The personality of Umberto Bossi can best be labelled as charismatic, which in and of itself served to further the aspirations and goals of the Lega Nord through its regionalist populist discourse. Bossi contrasted himself from typical politicians by presenting himself as “an anti-political figure, a man of the people.”<sup>27</sup> This is not unlike many trends of populist parties where, according to Professor Takis Pappas, one of the reinforcing characteristics of populism is “a reliance on extraordinary charismatic leadership.”<sup>28</sup> Bossi reflected this in his informal style of speech where agitation, emotion, and curtness took the forefront of his discourse. His physical

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<sup>24</sup> “Umberto Bossi | Biography, Politics, & Facts,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Umberto-Bossi>.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Leonardi and Monique Kovacs, “The Lega Nord: The Rise of a New Italian Catch-All Party,” *Italian Politics* 8 (1993): 50–65.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 50–65

<sup>27</sup> Andrej Zaslove, *The Re-Invention of the European Radical Right: Populism, Regionalism, and the Italian Lega Nord* (Montreal, CANADA: MQUP, 2011), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bu/detail.action?docID=3332232>.

<sup>28</sup> Pappas, “Populists in Power.”

appearance played well into this narrative of anti-politics, where Bossi presented himself to supporters and the electorate with unkempt hair and casual dress wear. All of this served to reflect a greater populist shift with the Lega Nord, a changing of political platform, and “an accompaniment of new forms of political mobilization.”<sup>29</sup> A political mobilization that sought to disrupt the status quo and establish a system of political authority and legitimacy for Padania.

### **Evolution of Lega Nord’s Ideological Focus**

The Lega Nord’s success for the time came in conjunction with the aforementioned charismatic leadership, and arguably more important, it’s populist regionalist philosophy. But how exactly did the Lega Nord subscribe to what has been labeled as a regionalist ideology? The answer is that Lega Nord’s regionalist message and focus has shifted through what can be seen as three phases, which correspond with key political developments of the Lega Nord. More specifically, these three phases were as follows: 1. A focus on a Federalist northern state, 2. then a transition to secession based on Northern exceptionalism (Padania), and finally 3. a transition to devolution of political power from the Italian state. The evolution of Lega Nord’s messaging is key to explaining its eventual adoption of a nationalist European far right agenda.

Prior to the formation of the Lega Nord, the aforementioned individual regional leagues focused on ethno-regionalism. Ethno-regionalism emphasizes protecting and maintaining the integrity of their respective local culture, dialect, and other ethno-regional aspects. However, with the creation of a unified party came the necessity of creating a unified movement. This unification was pushed by Lega Nord as “the autonomy of a Northern Republic within the confines of a federal state...The Lega Nord claimed that these regions were sufficiently distinct

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<sup>29</sup> Andrej Zaslove, *The Re-Invention of the European Radical Right: Populism, Regionalism, and the Italian Lega Nord*

in terms of culture, language, and economy to warrant radical reconstruction of the state.”<sup>30</sup> Such an autonomy however, required a key component: consolidating any ethno-regionalist differences within northern Italy in order to create a unified northern state within Italy. This was particularly achieved through the Lega Nord tapping into their populist roots and emphasizing a new threat: **Rome and the south.**

In 1994, in response to electoral losses caused by a brief adoption of center-right ideology, the Lega Nord began its second ideological phase: Padania and a need for secession from the Italian state. The Lega Nord focused its advocacy on defending and promoting the existence of what they called the Federal Republic of Padania – an administratively unofficial region that encompassed Northern and parts of Central Italy. According to the Lega Nord, Padania was destined for greatness and a secessionist movement would enable the Republic of Padania to not only excel, but to also rediscover their historical roots as a united region. Historical roots based on a “common bond born of open and democratic communities, a commitment to autonomy, and deeply rooted democratic traditions.”<sup>31</sup> Such linking of the North through a shared democratic history was particularly significant in that it provided a platform of legitimacy for the Lega Nord and for their conceived notion of Padania.

Yet in addition to the aforementioned democratic linkage, there was also present an alleged shared ancestral history that justified the existence of Padania. This ancestry hails back from the early 9<sup>th</sup> century settlers of central Europe, to the regions of Central Europe that once belonged to Austro-Hungarian empire. According to leadership of the Lega Nord, this area of

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<sup>30</sup> Andrej Zaslove, *The Re-Invention of the European Radical Right: Populism, Regionalism, and the Italian Lega Nord*

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 95

*Miteleuropa* “is the natural market of our area [and has] common traditions, cultures, and mentalities.”<sup>32</sup>, where it has

“influence[d] the physical traits of the Padani and ha[s] left the heritage of attachment to local autonomies and the underlying aspiration to freedom. [Those in the South] are in fact heirs to the Etruscan, Greek, and Italian populations stationed first in the Mediterranean basin... therefore [Italy is] cut into two ethnic roots.”<sup>33</sup>

Not only did this look to unite the people of the North as the Padani, but it also furthered the narrative of Northern exceptionalism and differentiation from their southern counterparts.

Historical roots were also utilized by creating a linkage through shared culture and tradition, more specifically a **tradition of liberty/autonomy**. From 1167’s Oath of Pontida, where “the communes of the North of Italy [stood] against the expansionistic intentions of the Roman-German emperor Federico Barbarossa,”<sup>34</sup> to Alberto da Giussano’s victory against Barbarossa in the battle of Legnano of 1176, such events were used to promote an agenda of secession. This was taken to such great lengths that even da Giussano’s figure, a medieval warrior raising a broadsword to the sky, became the symbol of the Lega Nord.

The agenda of secession was further exacerbated with the Lega Nord’s focus on the alleged detrimental influence of their southern neighbors. Initially, the rhetoric of anti-unification

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<sup>32</sup> Zúquete, “Missionary Politics in Contemporary Europe / José Pedro Zúquete.” HathiTrust, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015074238513&view=1up&seq=137&q1=influence+the+physical>.

<sup>33</sup> Gianluca Passarelli, “Crossing the Rubicon...and Back: Twenty Years of the Italian Northern League, ‘South European Society and Politics,’” *South European Society and Politics*, accessed March 7, 2021, [https://www.academia.edu/4775453/Crossing\\_the\\_Rubicon\\_and\\_back\\_Twenty\\_years\\_of\\_the\\_Italian\\_Northern\\_League\\_South\\_European\\_Society\\_and\\_Politics\\_](https://www.academia.edu/4775453/Crossing_the_Rubicon_and_back_Twenty_years_of_the_Italian_Northern_League_South_European_Society_and_Politics_).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

focused on Italy's 19<sup>th</sup> century unification known as *Risorgimento*, where Bossi and the Lega Nord claimed that "the unified State post-*Risorgimento* was a military construction at the expense of old territorial entities that were based on centuries-old autonomies and freedoms."<sup>35</sup> Bossi also claimed that such a military construction is in actuality an example of a historical continuity. In other words, they claim that the Italian State has never really changed and it is the "same old State, untouched from the *Risorgimento* to the liberal period, and from fascism to the Republic."<sup>36</sup>

The Lega Nord also demonized southerners for their alleged incompetence and laziness, accusing them of conspiring against the economic and societal success of the North. However, they soon linked their "anti-southern stance with its fundamental anti-partyocracy attitude than to any primordial motivation."<sup>37</sup> The Lega Nord argued that southerners were intrinsically part of the Italian 'system', where southerners are often employed by the government and by consequence have played a role in the disruption of northern society. As is typical of populist parties, the Lega Nord accused the Italian government of corruption and party dominance over the realm of politics and socio-economics. Such dominance allegedly benefited the Mezzogiorno and crippled the economic capacity and opportunities of Padania. This is seen with the "rhetoric denounce[ing] the central government as "*Roma ladrona*" (Rome the thief), a nest of corrupt elites allegedly bent on exploiting hardworking northerners."<sup>38</sup> By doing this, the Lega Nord granted itself the opportunity to be the answer to a growing number of disgruntled northern

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<sup>35</sup>"The Lega Nord: the Rise of a New Italian Catch-All Party," accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45132570>. 50-65

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Roberto D'Alimonte, "How the Populists Won in Italy," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 114–27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0009>.

voters. This was further exemplified with the Lega Nord's approach to immigration, where they alleged that it was the failure of the state to police borders that consequently allowed immigrants to harm the economy of the North. Such actions are emblematic of the combative element of 'us vs. them' that is all too common in populist parties.

In addition to the ideological shift of the Lega Nord, the party also enacted a number of institutional changes within both the party and region in order to reinforce the existence of Padania. For example, in 1995, Umberto Bossi "announced the opening of the parliament of the north in Mantua [and] in 1996, the parliament changed its name to the Parliament of Padania and the party was renamed the Lega Nord for the Independence of Padania."<sup>39</sup> Such actions, although mainly symbolic in nature, served to emphasize the institutionalization and construction of the nation of Padania.

However, the secessionist platform of Lega Nord was eventually abandoned. This failure can be attributed to the rather poor reception that the concept of Padania received from not only the electorate, but also the business sector. A poll conducted in 1998 for the magazine *LiMes* "indicated that 68.9% of northerners considered separation to be unacceptable/disastrous."<sup>40</sup> Such poor reception forced Bossi and the Lega Nord to moderate the party's message, and thus began the third phase of Lega Nord's ideological transformation: devolution. Lega Nord and their agenda of devolution, rather than exclusively focusing on separating from the Italian state, sought to decentralize power and influence over policies such as healthcare, education, etc. away from the Italian state (particularly the south). Devolution provided a platform that allowed the Lega Nord to not only distinguish itself from other emerging political parties, but also maintain

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<sup>39</sup> Andrej Zaslove, *The Re-Invention of the European Radical Right: Populism, Regionalism, and the Italian Lega Nord*, 95.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 96

its intrinsic primary message of syphoning governing power away from the south. This shift in ideological focus was sparked with Bossi's decision in 2001 to join *La Casa Delle Libertà* (House of Freedoms), a centre-right political alliance led by Silvio Berlusconi.

In truth, while ideological transitions within the party itself were crucial to Lega Nord's evolution, another important factor was the restructuring of the Italian party system. A great example of this is seen with the governmental electoral system's transition from pure proportional to a Mixed Member Majoritarian (running concurrently from the First to the Second Republic). The

“implementation of a partial first-past-the-post voting system meant that it was strategically advantageous for the Lega [Nord] to join forces with Forza Italia... the Lega [Nord] was now forced to contend with political competition from Forza Italia and MSI, they could no longer portray itself as the sole opposition to the corruption of the First Republic.”<sup>41</sup>

The changing of party structure prompted the Lega Nord to shift their focus from northern exceptionalism/regionalism to that of “economic and cultural protectionism... as well as to the consolidation of its support among the working class and among voters fearful of economic, social, and cultural decline.”<sup>42</sup> This is of course in addition to the increasing influence of EU integration and globalization that had accelerated the evolution of Lega Nord into Lega.

It is these modifications with party philosophy and structure where one begins to see a slow, but ever present, change of an exclusivist regionalist populist party to a federally focused

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<sup>41</sup> Andrej Zaslove, *The Re-Invention of the European Radical Right: Populism, Regionalism, and the Italian Lega Nord*, 66.

<sup>42</sup> Andrej Zaslove, *The Re-Invention of the European Radical Right: Populism, Regionalism, and the Italian Lega Nord*, 68.



nationalist party. However, this transformation could never have been completely achieved with Bossi at the helm of the Lega Nord—as much of the ideological and political direction of the Lega Nord was dictated by the leadership of the party itself. Umberto Bossi was first and foremost a proponent of Northern Italian sovereignty; which helps explain why Lega Nord adopted this regionalist ideology. However, this all changed with Bossi’s resignation from the Lega Nord. In 2012, judicial investigations found “that taxpayers’ money earmarked for his party had been spent on improvements to his house and favours for members of his family.”<sup>43</sup> This scandal was perpetrated by the party’s treasurer, Francesco Belsito, who was subsequently charged with fraud, embezzlement, and money laundering. These developments dealt a major blow to the party that painted itself against the corruption of government, as seen through the Lega Nord “[losing] more than 50% of its consensus [in the May 2012 administrative election] when compared to the 2010 regional election.”<sup>44</sup> The vacuum in leadership provided the opportunity of new leadership for the Lega Nord, and in turn a subsequent transformation of the Lega Nord’s philosophy.

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<sup>43</sup> John Hooper, “Umberto Bossi Resigns as Leader of Northern League amid Funding Scandal,” *The Guardian*, April 5, 2012, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/05/umberto-bossi-resigns-northern-league>.

<sup>44</sup> Brunazzo, Marco, and Christophe Roux. “The Lega Nord: From Regional Protest to National Government,” 2013.

## **From Lega Nord to Lega**

### **Maroni interim term**

With Umberto Bossi's resignation came the necessity of new leadership for the wounded Lega Nord. The "political and judicial events involving the so-called 'magic circle' (*il cerchio magico*)"<sup>45</sup> essentially streamlined the rise of new leadership. Roberto Maroni, who was effectively the second in command of the Lega Nord, was elected to be the next federal secretary of Lega Nord at the Assago forum of 2012. Maroni's term as federal secretary is one that was tasked with sparking the rebuilding effort of the Lega Nord. Maroni constructed a coalition that consisted of figures such as Matteo Salvini (elected secretary of Lega Lombarda) in order to further develop Lega Nord. As previously mentioned, the events of the Belsito scandal sparked a major downturn in electoral support for the party as seen through the Lega Nord's drastic defeat in the 2013 general elections (gained 4.1% of the vote). However, one particular victory that Maroni achieved was of great significance: The 2013 regional elections in Lombardy saw Roberto Maroni elected as President. This eventually resulted in Lega Nord once again establishing a political foothold within a significant portion of Northern Italy.

### **Salvini's rise to leadership**

The relative instability and vulnerability of the Lega Nord presented the opportunity for both a new ideological and organizational structure to take hold. More specifically, in 2013 Maroni announced his resignation as federal secretary and prompted a special election to take place. Of the multitude of candidates pursuing the federal secretary position, two presented a

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<sup>45</sup> Gianluca Passarelli, "The 2013 Italian Elections Will Be Pivotal for the Future of Lega Nord and the Regions of Northern Italy.," EUROPP, February 6, 2013, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2013/02/06/2013-italian-elections-lega-nord-italy-padania-bossi-monti-maroni/>.

legitimate chance of attaining said position: Secretary of Lega Lombarda Matteo Salvini, and previous Lega Nord Federal Secretary Umberto Bossi. Matteo Salvini, having secured the endorsement of Maroni and other leading members of the party, defeated Bossi's bid for federal secretary with a margin of 82% to 18% in the closed primary.

While Matteo Salvini's leadership and rhetoric will be further analyzed later in this thesis, one cannot overlook his effect on the party as a whole. The election's drastic repudiation of who was once a revered leader of the Lega Nord served as a symbol of the shifting ideological foundation of the party. More specifically, it demonstrated that Lega Nord's primary ideology had undergone a radicalization that laid the groundwork for Matteo Salvini's nationalism. One such example of this radicalization could be seen back in 2001 where "9/11... helped justify radicalizing the party's position from being critical of how immigration had been managed by successive governments, to framing it as an existential threat to the very survival of the identities and cultures of northern Italians."<sup>46</sup> This, compounded with the ideological and power vacuum left through Bossi's and Maroni's resignation, demonstrated a process of party renovation through both generational and ideological means. A renovation that would have lasting political and societal consequences for both country and nation.

Once elected as federal secretary, Salvini made the conscious effort of distancing himself and the party from previous regionalist aligned rhetoric and policies. According to Salvini's biographer, Alessandro Franzi, early on Salvini came to the conclusion that

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<sup>46</sup> Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini, and Antonella Seddone, "'No Regionalism Please, We Are Leghisti !' The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini," *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (n.d.): 645.

“independence was not people’s main problem. He understood that people were fighting against globalization, inequality, migration, unemployment, and he understood that if he wanted to get more votes, he had to speak to all the Italians, not just the northern Italian citizens.”<sup>47</sup>

By highlighting an alleged common, existential threat to *all* Italians, Salvini was able to accomplish two crucial steps: provide a platform for reconciliation between party and the *Mezzogiorno*, and align the party more with other conventional European far right forces; thus, moving the party further towards nationalism rather than regionalism. This messaging was of course enhanced by Salvini’s conciliatory rhetoric towards southerners, where in his early speeches he both claimed that “either Italy saves itself as a nation, or else all of its regions, without exception, will face ruin,”<sup>48</sup> and apologized for previous anti-southerner rhetoric he made. Salvini’s decision to abandon the narrative of regionalism was momentous for the party, as it explicitly demonstrated his goal for Lega Nord: “to become a true national force and ally with other ultra-right groups in a common fight against ‘the enemies of all Italians’: illegal immigration, the European Union, and the economic crisis.”<sup>49</sup> In the eyes of Salvini, and in turn the party, the European Union/Euro/immigrants was the true existential threat to the sovereignty of not only the North, but also the Italian nation.

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<sup>47</sup> “Matteo Salvini: a Political Chameleon Thriving on Fears,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, June 22, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/22/matteo-salvini-a-political-chameleon-thriving-on-fears>.

<sup>48</sup> Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini, and Antonella Seddone, “‘No Regionalism Please, We Are Leghisti!’ The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini,” *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (n.d.): 645.

<sup>49</sup> Cremonesi, M. (2014, October 20). La svolta “nazionalista” della Lega [The Lega’s nationalist turn]. *Corriere della Sera*, p. 11.

With the Lega Nord's antagonism shifting from the South to the European establishment, a number of changes occurred for the Lega Nord that solidified the transition from regionalism to nationalism. In the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis, Euroscepticism was rapidly gaining traction in the European political sphere (as seen through increased support for Eurosceptic parties). Sensing this trend, Salvini created alliances with other Eurosceptic nationalists within the European parliament, including Marine Le Pen. These alliances, along with an ideological shift of the party, culminated in the 2014 European parliament elections. Here, rather than running on a ticket of Northern independence/sovereignty, the Lega Nord ran on a *Basta Euro* (Stop the Euro) ticket, which not only emphasized Euroscepticism but also specifically targeted the alleged detriment of the 'German-benefiting Euro.' Such direction resulted in a net positive electoral result when compared to the dismal performance of the Lega Nord in 2013 (at the height of the Belsito scandal). In 2014, the Lega Nord gained 6 Members of the European parliament (MEPs) while under the Europe of Nations and Freedom Group, and obtained victories within local regional coalitions in the North once again.

Such momentum resulted in further expansion of Lega Nord's political focus of Italy as a nation. This was particularly seen in July of 2014 where "Salvini clarified the strategic implications of this change of direction, by hailing the forthcoming creation of 'one or more movements' across the whole of Italy."<sup>50</sup> This movement across Italy was best personified during the Emilia-Romagna regional election of 2014 where, within an area that predominantly supported the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico, PD*), the Lega Nord won roughly 20% of the vote. These victories prompted the creation of a sister party known as the NcS ('Noi con

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<sup>50</sup> Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini, and Antonella Seddone, "'No Regionalism Please, We Are Leghisti!'" The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini," *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (n.d.): 645.

Salvini – Us with Salvini). The NcS focused itself on the subnational elections in the southern and central regions of Italy through the same adopted Eurosceptic, ‘us vs. them’ mentality of Salvini’s Lega Nord. All of these developments eventually led to the decision by Salvini to persuade the federal council of the Lega Nord to rename the party as just ‘**Lega**’ (with vehement opposition from conservative party hardliners, including Bossi). Dropping the ‘North’ accomplished two particular goals in regards to the transition to a populist nationalist party: 1. A further separation from the regionalist agenda that originally birthed the Lega Nord. 2. Empowered Matteo Salvini by “strengthening the personalization process [of the party] by adding his name on the logo of the party as its candidate for the premiership (i.e. Lega Salvini Premier).”<sup>51</sup> In addition to this, the rebranded party continued to expand their outreach to the south by nixing NcS and replacing their sister party with another parallel party under the same label: ‘Lega per Salvini Premier’ (LSP).

## **2018 Italian General Election and the Yellow Green Coalition**

Under a new party label and ideological focus, the upcoming 2018 general elections would be consequential in legitimizing the Lega as a relatively newly formed nationalist political force. It was apparent that the

“debate around the 2018 general election accelerated the pace of a change that was affecting the LN’s ideology... hence the increased focus on immigration, identity

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<sup>51</sup> Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini, and Antonella Seddone, “‘No Regionalism Please, We Are Leghisti !’ The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini,” *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (n.d.): .

issues and law and order... shelving of calls for regional autonomy for northern Italy, and a distinct focus on the national dimension.”<sup>52</sup>

For this election, Lega formed a center-right alliance with two other conservative parties: Fratelli d'Italia and Forza Italia. On March 4, 2018, the Italian parliamentary elections were held and the results for both the populist movement and Lega were nothing short of outstanding. While the center-left suffered an electoral defeat, the aforementioned center-right coalition attained the highest vote total at 37% for the Chamber of Deputies and 37.5% for the Italian Senate. More importantly, with their “nationalist, anti-immigrant [agenda], the Lega outperformed the more moderate Forza Italia” with a margin of more than 3% of the vote for Lega in both the Chamber and the Senate.<sup>53</sup> The results of the 2018 elections saw Lega win a plurality within both chambers of the Italian government, along with the Italian government resulting in a hung parliament.

With no one coalition having a majority and political gridlock being widespread, the Lega sought to further its political influence by attaining said majority. Through collaboration between Salvini and M5S' Luigi Di Maio, it was decided that a joint cabinet would be established under the leadership of university professor Giuseppe Conte. Thus was born the ‘Yellow-green coalition’/’government of change’ which was a joint cabinet consisting of primarily both Lega and the Five Star Movement (M5S). There was little agreement when it came to policy between these two parties, where Lega was focused on “stemming migration

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<sup>52</sup> Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini, and Antonella Seddone, “‘No Regionalism Please, We Are Leghisti!’ The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini,” *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (n.d.): 645.

<sup>53</sup> Belkin, Paul. “Elections in Italy,” March 8, 2018. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IN10867.pdf>.

flows into the country and cutting taxes, [while] the 5 star [focused] on expanding the social safety net and radically reforming Italy's sclerotic political system."<sup>54</sup> However there was one shared trait: "a general contempt for the EU"<sup>55</sup> through populist means that would serve as the foundational basis of this coalition. Italian Prime Minister Conte put it best when he stated that his populist, anti-establishment government is populist "if populism is the attitude of the ruling class to listen to the people's needs... [and] if anti-system means aiming at introducing a new system able to remove old privileges and encrusted power."<sup>56</sup> The significance of the establishment of this coalition is that the ideological populist roots of the Lega (and of course the M5S) were now being both implemented and reinforced by a ruling Italian government. This is best exemplified by Matteo Salvini's appointment as both Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior. What is particularly interesting about this coalition is the nature of populism that the M5S was rooted in. Rather than root its populist ideology on the traditional political spectrum (as the Lega has done with the far-right), the M5S exclusively focuses its messaging on anti-system rhetoric. The coalition would play a significant role in the development of populism for both the party and country, a role that will be covered in a further analysis of Salvini and his influence on the Lega.

## **2019 Italian Government Crisis & Lega's Current State of Affairs**

Having a drastic dichotomy in political vision between both the Lega and the M5S admittedly led to a number of boiling issues throughout the governing coalition's 14-month

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<sup>54</sup> Angelos Chrysosgelos, "What the EU Should Learn From Italy's Political Crisis," Time (Time, May 31, 2018), <https://time.com/5297025/italy-populism-political-crisis/>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Jason Horowitz, "Italy's New Populist Government Articulates Vision, but Few Specifics," The New York Times (The New York Times, June 5, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/05/world/europe/italy-government-giuseppe-conte.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>.



tenure. These included issues such as allegations of Salvini's Lega taking financial assistance from Vladimir Putin, to conflict between the construction of a Lyon-Turin railroad project. The latter in particular served as the spark to the 2019 Italian governmental crisis, where Lega's valued rail project was derailed by M5S' votes to block construction. In addition to these inter-party conflicts, the Lega and Salvini found themselves gaining more and more electoral support. This was best exemplified in the 2019 European Parliament election where Lega "took one third of the Italian vote... and turned around the balance of power between the [Lega and M5S]."<sup>57</sup>

All of this, along with an apparent ambition of Salvini to vie for power, resulted in Salvini renouncing the M5S coalition, filing a vote of no confidence against Conte, and forcing the need for a snap election. Salvini hoped to consolidate his electoral and political power by ousting M5S and making Lega the majority party (further boosted by increasing public support throughout the coalition's tenure). However, Salvini "failed to take into account the possibility that Five Star and the Democratic Party would overcome their reciprocal hatred and join forces inside Parliament to stop him."<sup>58</sup> The M5S agreed to form a coalition with the Democratic Party in order to prevent Salvini's rise to power and appointed Giuseppe Conte as the Prime Minister once again, resulting in an outmaneuvering of the populist leader.

This now leaves the Lega in an interesting situation, where they now find themselves as the opposition to the majority government. However, recent developments show that Matteo Salvini and the League may have an opportunity to regain a majority government. As of early January of 2021, the "former prime minister Matteo Renzi [has] withdrawn his Italia Viva party

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<sup>57</sup> "In Italy, Anti-Migrant Populist Wins Big," Voice of America, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/italy-anti-migrant-populist-wins-big>.

<sup>58</sup> Jason Horowitz, "New Government Takes Shape in Italy, Sidelining Salvini and the Hard Right," The New York Times (The New York Times, August 28, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/28/world/europe/italy-government-salvini.html>.

from the country's ruling coalition.”<sup>59</sup> This resignation being the result of politically focused clashes, the governing coalition now finds itself lacking a necessary parliamentary majority. Unless Giuseppe Conte can secure and pass a vote of confidence/President Mattarella forming a new coalition, “the opposition, which is made up of the League, its fellow far-right partner, Brothers of Italy, and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, could potentially secure more than 50% of the vote.”<sup>60</sup> However in February of 2021, after continued failed efforts to form a new government, President Mattarella summoned Mario Draghi (former president of the European Central Bank) to form a new technocratic government. This new government has seen widespread support and vote of confidence from the Five Star Movement, Lega, Forza Italia, the Democratic Party, and the Italia Viva party. In the context of Lega, “Salvini's endorsement of Draghi marks a potential sea change for the League, shunting it out of the far-right, Eurosceptic camp and into the moderate, centre right.”<sup>61</sup> What will happen remains to be seen, but more analysis into the current situation will be provided in the conclusion of this thesis.

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<sup>59</sup> “Italy Facing Political Crisis after Ex-PM Withdraws Party from Coalition,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, January 13, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/13/italy-facing-fresh-elections-after-ex-pm-withdraws-party-from-coalition>.

<sup>60</sup> “Italy Facing Political Crisis after Ex-PM Withdraws Party from Coalition,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, January 13, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/13/italy-facing-fresh-elections-after-ex-pm-withdraws-party-from-coalition>.

<sup>61</sup> Crispian Balmer and Giselda Vagnoni, “Cornered by Draghi, Italy's Salvini Shifts His Party out of Far-Right Camp,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, February 10, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-politics-league-analysis/cornered-by-draghi-italys-salvini-shifts-his-party-out-of-far-right-camp-idUSKBN2AA1DO>.

## **Matteo Salvini**

With the Lega Nord's shift away from regionalism, the following question arises: how was Salvini capable of transforming the foundational and electoral base of the Lega Nord? Much like Umberto Bossi, Salvini's success has come from his effective communication strategies. Salvini has had the benefit of implementing his populist messages through his joint efforts on Facebook, his tenure as the Minister of the Interior, and in person efforts such as rallies and speeches. As Minister of the Interior, Salvini pushed for policies and actions that worked against assisting the EU and pro-immigrant efforts. Salvini worked "against NGOs rescuing migrants at sea and taking them to Italian ports."<sup>62</sup> In the eyes of voters, his actions showed that he was capable of following up his promises with action. This heavily contrasts with the all too common disillusionment that is associated with traditional Italian politicians. One controversial instance of this occurred in 2018, when Salvini turned away "a boatload of more than 600 African refugees on a ship named Aquarius operated by the not-for-profit organization SOS Méditerranée, which rescues people stranded at sea trying to reach Europe."<sup>63</sup> Salvini's actions has led to him being criticized by the European Union, which in turn has allowed him to "appear as the leader that Italy needs to protect its interests at the EU level."<sup>64</sup>

### **Communication Strategies: Speeches and Rallies**

In order to effectively portray himself as a man of the people, Matteo Salvini has tailored his rhetoric (in both his speeches and rallies) in order to tap into a collective frustration of the

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<sup>62</sup> D'Alimonte, "How the Populists Won in Italy."

<sup>63</sup> "How Matteo Salvini Pulled Italy to the Far Right," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, August 9, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/09/how-matteo-salvini-pulled-italy-to-the-far-right>.

<sup>64</sup> D'Alimonte. "How the Populists won in Italy."

people. More importantly, Salvini does this in a way that stokes rather than assuages the Lega's constituency's anger towards immigrants, the EU, and the establishment. His rhetoric reflects this, as Salvini consistently applies negative connotations when it comes to the functioning of the EU, of immigrants, and other nations that work to oppose his nativist populist ideals. This is seen on both the international and domestic stage.

In the case of the former, three speeches given by Salvini during the 8<sup>th</sup> parliamentary term of the European parliament will be briefly examined. The first is Salvini's response to the Hungarian situation in 2017, where Hungary's Parliament had approved a new education law that had called for the relocation of the Central European university out of the country. In his response to this situation, Salvini claimed that "while the terrorists shed blood in Europe, [the EP is] concerned with prosecuting Hungary – Mr. Orban, hold on – [the EP is] dealing with the rights of the Roma, the fake refugees, the billions of Soros and NOT a legitimately elected government."<sup>65</sup> To label this comment as scathing would be a gross understatement. While using a facetious tone towards the EP, Salvini successfully peddles the narrative of 'fake' refugees and a Soros conspiracy being the true threat, not Hungary's education law. Salvini goes on to draw blatant comparison between the EU and the Soviet Union, going so far as to say "that some Europeanists of today who cheer Europe and cheer Macron... [cheered] when the Soviet tanks invaded Hungary... instead of tanks you use banks, finance, and an invasion of fake refugee immigrants."<sup>66</sup> What Salvini accomplishes here is to further promulgate rhetoric which serves to delegitimize international actors such as the European Union.

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<sup>65</sup> "Dezbateri - Anul European Al Patrimoniului Cultural (Dezbatare) - Miercuri, 26 Aprilie 2017," [europarl.europa.eu](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-04-26-INT-1-224-0000_RO.html), accessed March 7, 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-04-26-INT-1-224-0000\\_RO.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-04-26-INT-1-224-0000_RO.html).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

The second speech was made during the parliamentary debate in regards to an EU response of hate speech, populism, and specifically fake news on social media. This speech in particular is significant in that Salvini taps into classic populist rhetoric through the use of cultural and popular media. To be more specific, Salvini asks if the EU is

“trying to control brains, trying to control the newspapers, the radio, the media... are you going to gag Facebook, the Internet, gag 50 million people?! You want to invent George Orwell’s Ministry of Truth, the Ministry of Propaganda! I expect the European Parliament to pay the psychological police to investigate the psychological crimes of those who are not aligned with the single thought and the single currency!”<sup>67</sup>

Also seen in the first speech, Salvini associates the EU with corrupt and dystopian-like institutions. In this case, the comparison is drawn between the EU and the infamous Ministry of Truth from George Orwell’s famed novel 1984. Essentially, Salvini is framing the EU and their actions as comparable to those of a secret police that looks to control the actions and suppress the liberty of the common people; thus, Salvini continues to effectively espouse the ‘us vs. them’ narrative.

The third and final speech that will be examined is Salvini’s input, on October 25<sup>th</sup> 2017, in the EU’s topical debate on illegal immigration and human trafficking in the Mediterranean. Salvini condemns the lack of action taken by the European establishment in curbing illegal immigration, especially the immigration of alleged “slaves, slackers, and/or thugs.”<sup>68</sup> Salvini goes further by saying that immigration be done through legal and positive immigration quotas

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<sup>67</sup> “Discussioni - Situazione in Ungheria (Discussione) - Mercoledì 26 Aprile 2017,” [europarl.europa.eu](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-04-26-INT-1-045-0000_IT.html), accessed March 7, 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-04-26-INT-1-045-0000\\_IT.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-04-26-INT-1-045-0000_IT.html).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

“for those men and women who really bring added value to our societies... from the countries closest to our values, and I am thinking of countries with a Christian culture.”<sup>69</sup> Through this glorification of Christianity, and subsequent vilification of the Islamic faith, Salvini is furthering the xenophobic rhetoric that has become a staple of the nativist populist Lega party.

Now while the aforementioned speeches deal with Salvini’s rhetoric on an international level, this also translates on domestic affairs as well. Salvini is very effective when it comes to rallies and fermenting anger against his party’s enemies. In 2015 for example, a Lega Nord protest was held at the Piazza del Popolo led by Salvini himself. This protest aimed to fight against both austerity and pro-immigration policies, while also looking to rally against then prime minister Matteo Renzi. What Salvini proclaimed to his followers exemplifies his perception: “The problem isn’t Renzi, Renzi is a pawn, Renzi is a dumb slave, at the disposal of some nameless person who wants to control all our lives from Brussels.”<sup>70</sup> Salvini goes on to further say that he wants to change Italy, one to where “the Italian economy [will] be able to move forward again, something that is obstructed by Brussels and mad European policies.”<sup>71</sup> While the aforementioned rally in the Piazza del Popolo looked to vilify the European establishment, the 2019 Pontida Rally shows how Salvini and his party looked to target immigration in their efforts to propagate the ethno nativist populist message. More specifically, Salvini looked to attack the then recent acceptance of a French charity ship into the port of Lampedusa. This ship had saved 82 refugees from Libya, and in response Salvini claimed that he

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<sup>69</sup> “Discussioni - Situazione in Ungheria (Discussione) - Mercoledì 26 Aprile 2017,” [europarl.europa.eu](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-04-26-INT-1-045-0000_IT.html), accessed March 7, 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-04-26-INT-1-045-0000\\_IT.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-04-26-INT-1-045-0000_IT.html).

<sup>70</sup> “Italy Anti-Immigration Rally Draws Thousands in Rome,” BBC News (BBC, February 28, 2015), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31674709>.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

“think[s] that immigration is going to be grim in the months ahead. It is going to get bad... the Italian people [cannot] be slaves to anyone.”<sup>72</sup> It is apparent that the strategy that Salvini utilizes, as seen on both the domestic and international stage, is to antagonize the European establishment and vilify immigrants; thus, proliferating the us vs them mentality of right wing populism.

### **Communication Strategies: Social Media**

On social media, Salvini makes the conscious effort of practicing one particular populist trait: appearing as a man of the people, thus connecting with constituents on a level that traditional politicians are allegedly incapable of. To say that Salvini is skilled in this aspect of outreach would be an understatement. Salvini’s “Facebook account has [4] million followers, and more engagement---that is, comments and reactions---than Trump’s, according to CrowdTangle, an analytics tool owned by Facebook.”<sup>73</sup> Salvini has achieved this milestone by adopting a highly informal style of communication while coupling his populist messaging with inclusive, and personal language. He refers to his more than 4 million followers as brothers or sisters, as family; thus, he continues to tap into the populist playbook of connecting directly with the people. He posts about his private, personal life while using informal style of dress and communication. By doing all of this, Salvini’s, and in turn Lega’s, social media presence has helped to “shape (and, indeed, dominate) national debates on issues concerning identity,

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<sup>72</sup> Carmelo Camilli, “League Leader Salvini Promises Referendums to Counter New Italy Government,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, September 15, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-politics-league-idUSKBN1W00HE>.

<sup>73</sup> Story by Rachel Donadio, “The New Populist Playbook,” The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, September 18, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/09/matteo-salvini-italy-populist-playbook/597298/>.

immigration, and law and order, as the controversial remarks made via [social media] accounts are immediately picked up by the press and television news.”<sup>74</sup>

The example below perfectly shows this, where an informal, personal touch is achieved through his style of clothing and indulgence in local delicacies. Furthermore, Salvini even takes a swipe at his opponents and democratic institutions with the following comment: “I could not leave the beautiful Catania, after the meeting on the earthquake in the Prefecture and an hour walk in the city centre among the people, without trying at least one arancino with meat sauce! What do you say, the PD will attack me?”<sup>75</sup>



<sup>74</sup> Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini, and Antonella Seddone, “‘No Regionalism Please, We Are Leghisti!’ The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini,” *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (n.d.): 645.

<sup>75</sup> Serena Guerra, “The Algorithmic Populism of Matteo Salvini,” *Diggit Magazine*, accessed April 30, 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/40657342/The\\_algorithmic\\_populism\\_of\\_Matteo\\_Salvini\\_Diggit\\_Magazine](https://www.academia.edu/40657342/The_algorithmic_populism_of_Matteo_Salvini_Diggit_Magazine).



Another perfect example comes with a more recent post from Salvini in regards to the Italian Recovery Plan in response to the Covid pandemic. As seen below, the post is translated as such:

“One million Italian farmers mocked by the government, in the Recovery Plan, less than 2 billion Euros are expected in the next few years to support sustainable agriculture, less than the amount that came from Europe before Covid. Shame! With the wine, sausages, oil, fishing and agritourist sectors in crisis, eating, drinking, and buying Italian is a duty



Here Salvini is directly attacking the actions of the majority government/establishment while victimizing and venerating the Italian public, especially his followers. The victimization in particular implies that the elitist Italian government and European establishment are looking to hamper common people, thus perpetuating the ‘us vs them’ rhetoric. This post of course is further supplemented by the accompanying picture, which shows Matteo Salvini smiling and holding Italian made products close to him. One particular aspect of this photo that should be acknowledged is that it follows the trend of Salvini “posting videos/[photos] where he holds the

phone himself, a pose that's not entirely flattering and shows his bearded chin, now flecked with gray, but that lets him speak directly to the people."<sup>76</sup>

To call Salvini an expert when it comes to effectively applying the dichotomy between charismatic amicability and borderline bigotry would be an understatement. Nothing shows this better than the following post:



At face value, one can see two defining features of this post: one of course is the bib around the baby which is marked with the words ‘STOP INVASIONE’, which translates to ‘STOP THE INVASION.’ Of course the second feature is the teddy bear wearing a Lega headband. What this post achieves is remarkable as it “invoked tenderness and empathy while contributing to the representation of a community in which family values are central.”<sup>77</sup> To add to this however, the

<sup>76</sup> Story by Rachel Donadio, “The New Populist Playbook,” The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, September 18, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/09/matteo-salvini-italy-populist-playbook/597298/>.

<sup>77</sup> Cinzia Padovani, “Lega Nord and Anti-Immigrationism: The Importance of Hegemony Critique for Social Media Analysis and Protest,” International Journal of Communication, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/8560>.

post also accomplished associating an anti-immigrant messaging with something as pure as a baby. Salvini's comment on his post is even more telling to this point as he states that "even Alessia [name of the baby] from Calavino says #stopinvasione."<sup>78</sup> These social media posts are crucial to Salvini's strategy as it is his main point of contact between not only his constituency, but also the public as a whole.

With the connection established between himself and the people, Salvini then utilizes an algorithmic operation and software known as "The Beast" in order to balance both the positive messaging of his personal life, and conflict-driven, tension-heightening focus. It is a meticulous algorithm which cleverly mixes positive and negative emotions in order to further Lega's messaging platform. The positive messaging is conveyed through the forms mentioned in the previous paragraphs, yet the negative messaging is a bit more intuitive. More specifically, this software functions by focusing on three main goals: "immediately occupy the media space... polarize the whole discussion around pro-Salvini and anti-Salvini... [and] launch strong messages, squeeze out of the public opinion its negative feelings so as to lower the guard of those who listen."<sup>79</sup> Salvini consequentially associates these negative public opinions with issues such as immigration, Italian security, and loss of control through EU intervention and globalization. Furthermore, Salvini has been able to ferment this notion of a united community that can mobilize both in his defense and as proponents of his idea across various platforms.

The application of these nationalist populist strategies has resulted in electoral gains for the party. An example of this success is seen in both recent general and regional Italian elections.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> "'The Beast,' an algorithm that tells Salvini if and how 'bad' to be," *lastampa.it*, September 10, 2018, <https://www.lastampa.it/esteri/la-stampa-in-english/2018/09/10/news/the-beast-an-algorithm-that-tells-salvini-if-and-how-bad-to-be-1.34044116>.

Under a centre-right coalition, the Lega had a strong performance and outperformed Berlusconi's Forza Italia party in the 2018 General Elections. This performance resulted in the Lega gaining 17.4% of the total votes and 73 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. This was also accompanied by a gain of 17.6% of vote total and 37 seats gained in the Italian Senate.<sup>80</sup> More significantly however are the electoral victories that the party has been able to make in what were formerly non-starter regions. This was seen in:

“the former ‘red belt’ of Emilia-Romagna, Marche, Tuscany, and Umbria, [where the party] has gone from a miniscule 1.5 percent in 2013 to 18 percent. And in southern Italy, this former party of northern secessionism pulled almost 8 percent of the vote.”<sup>81</sup>

During the 2019 regional elections, the Lega was able to gain victory under a centre-right coalition in the southern region of Basilicata, ending 24 years of leftwing rule.<sup>82</sup> Arguably one of the most prominent successes that the newly reformed party achieved came with the recent 2019 European elections. On the one hand, a near devastating blow was dealt to the anti-establishment Five Star movement where support since the general election fell from 32 to 17 percent. On the other hand, the Lega drastically increased from 17 percent of support to 34 percent.<sup>83</sup> Victories such as these has made the party into one of the most successful far-right populist parties throughout Western Europe. It has also resulted in Matteo Salvini gaining greater political influence to the point where many consider him to be the de facto leader of Italy.

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<sup>80</sup> Belkin, Paul. “Elections in Italy,” March 8, 2018. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IN10867.pdf>.

<sup>81</sup> D’Alimonte, “How the Populists Won in Italy.”

<sup>82</sup> “Far-Right Italian Deputy Matteo Salvini Takes Basilicata in South | World News | The Guardian,” accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/25/far-right-italian-deputy-matteo-salvini-takes-basilicata-in-south>.

<sup>83</sup> Nathalie Tocci, “How Italy Lost the European Election,” POLITICO, May 28, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-italy-lost-european-election-2019-national-maginalization/>.

Even with these victories however, it cannot be said that the reformation of the Lega Nord was met with open arms by the entire party. Ex-leader Bossi claimed that “if Salvini brings the party to the South then the Lega would be over.”<sup>84</sup> This pushback was instigated by party conservative hardliners who claimed that Salvini was detaching the Lega Nord from its original, regionalist ideals. In a way these disgruntled party representatives were justified because Salvini was in fact emphasizing Italian solidarity against the common European enemy. Such a discord is becoming more and more pertinent to Salvini, as he must find a way to reconcile the admittedly two different directions the party is taking at the same time: appeasing regionalist advocates while emphasizing national solidarity. This problem for Salvini is further exacerbated when looking at the actual name of the party today. Although still officially in party statute known as the Lega Nord, Salvini used social media to unofficially change the de facto name of the party to Lega (league) in hopes of attracting more central and southern Italian votes. Salvini has adopted for the time being what professor Roberto D’Alimonte considers to be a League “*à la carte*.” This is seen where the party runs as the Lega Nord in certain northern regional elections, but running as the Lega in southern regional elections.<sup>85</sup> Although this particular ‘tailoring to the electorate’ may breed short term political victories, the long term consequences on the party are still possible to occur without proper acknowledgement.

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<sup>84</sup> Redazione ANSA, “Salvini: 'Stop Ad Alleanza Con Alfano Anche in Lombardia' - Politica,” ANSA.it, May 15, 2017, [https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2017/05/14/primarie-lega-sfida-salvini-fava-militanti-al-voto-\\_1370d893-de03-466e-9432-2b6614ed7ed2.html](https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2017/05/14/primarie-lega-sfida-salvini-fava-militanti-al-voto-_1370d893-de03-466e-9432-2b6614ed7ed2.html).

<sup>85</sup> D’Alimonte, “How the Populists Won in Italy.”

## **Conclusion**

Through analyzing both the Lega Nord and the Lega, it is apparent that there are both similarities and differences between a regionalist and nationalist populist party. The obvious difference is in the ideology that serves as a distinction between these two parties. On the one hand, the Lega Nord's regionalist platform ultimately did have a primary focus on Northern Italy and its secession primarily from Southern Italy. On the other hand, the transformed Lega adopted what was seen as a more nativist European far-right platform that focused on vilifying immigrants and blaming the European Union for economic and societal issues within Italy. Yet even with these differences, the persistent nature of populism is ever present.

The most important aspect of this analysis has been demonstrating that the characteristics of populism transcends basic ideological categorization. These characteristics include the presence of a pivotal charismatic leadership in both the Lega Nord and Lega—Umberto Bossi and Matteo Salvini respectively. An assault on larger, and predominantly liberal, institutions – Italian government epitomized by Rome, and the European establishment being physically manifested by the European union. And of course one of the most important aspects that has always been seen is the presence of political polarization. This polarization is the main foundation of populism, where again we see a focus on a us vs them mentality. On the one hand, the Lega Nord demonstrated this by treating their regionalist centric electorate as the common people – the people that have been for years targeted and subjected to abuse from both southerners and more importantly, the corrupt elitists in Rome. On the other hand, the Lega maintained this same narrative with a different veneer, where the people were epitomized by Italians and the elitist was epitomized by the European Union. All of this works to corroborate the aforementioned theory of Cas Mudde's 'thin ideology' along with demonstrating that Takis

Pappas was correct in labelling the aforementioned characteristics as commonplace, if not essential.

And in the end, while the development of Salvini's Lega is somewhat unique, the party serves as a piece to the larger puzzle of the rise of European far right populism. Countries around Europe have seen the rise of their own vocal populist sectors. Look at the National Rally led by Marine Le Pen, whose inherent Euroscepticism and opposition to immigration has fed into the narrative of an ever present dichotomy. Even more significant is the fact that these nationalist populisms based parties have begun to cooperate with one another. In 2019,

“Euroskeptic populist parties formed a new and expanded right wing alliance that aim[ed] to become the strongest faction in the European Parliament and seeks to radically transform European union policies on migration, security, family, and environment.”<sup>86</sup>

This alliance would eventually be the successor of the ‘Europe of Nations and Freedom’ party within the European Parliament. In June of 2019, the Identity and Democracy European parliament party was formed and consists of heavy hitter European far-right populist parties. These include the Freedom party of Austria, the National Rally of France, the Alternative for Germany, Salvini's League, the Party for Freedom (Netherlands), and countless others. Such alliances have posed a further risk to the European establishment and governing institutions throughout Europe.

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<sup>86</sup> Colleen Barry, “Euroskeptic, Populist Parties Form Alliance in Europe,” AP NEWS (Associated Press, April 8, 2019), <https://apnews.com/article/b79ca1111d194d098574743717ef7b58>.

What cannot be ignored, however, is the impact the Covid-19 pandemic may have on the Lega and other populist powers throughout Europe. While it may be premature to determine whether the impact will be inherently negative, what can be said is that populism “won’t be killed off by this crisis. To the contrary, it flourishes in crisis.”<sup>87</sup> What has been seen throughout this thesis is that successful nativist populist parties, such as the Lega, are those that are able to adapt and manipulate situations of crises to their advantage. More specifically, throughout this pandemic one can see that populist parties have utilized the foundation of thin ideology to paint Covid-19 as a further example of the establishment’s failure to help the people. In the spring, having first criticized the closure of borders, the Lega has now pivoted to “criticizing Conte’s government for its confinement measures, migration policies, and position in the European negotiations on the Recovery fund.”<sup>88</sup> By doing so, the Lega and their coalition have reframed the narrative of culpability towards the ruling government, one that is allegedly to the detriment of the people suffering from the pandemic. Rhetoric such as this, along with the current Italian governmental crisis, could serve to provide far right nativist populism an opportunity to come into power.

Furthermore, recent developments within Italian politics has served to further solidify the theory of populism/populists being a thin ideology/ideologists. With the dissipation of the Conte government and the rise of Draghi’s new technocratic government, Salvini threw his support towards the new government. This saw Lega gain an “immediate bump in its poll ratings thanks

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<sup>87</sup> Yasmeen Serhan, “The Pandemic Isn’t a Death Knell for Populism,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, August 22, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/08/populism-will-survive-the-pandemic/615358/>.

<sup>88</sup> Giovanna De Maio, “The Impact of COVID-19 on the Italian Far Right: The Rise of Brothers of Italy,” *Brookings* (Brookings, November 30, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/30/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-italian-far-right-the-rise-of-brothers-of-italy/>.



to its decision to join the new, broad-based government, with support climbing .7 points over the past week to 24%.<sup>89</sup> The populist aspect of this party has resulted in a gravitation towards the more popular position and has raised speculation that the Lega may indeed abandon a nationalist rhetoric and adopt a conventional center-right position. According to Roberto D'Alimonte, "this is a strategic choice that will be consolidated only if things go well. If things go badly, then it is all over. [Salvini] will return to the nationalist camp."<sup>90</sup> What will happen though, remains to be seen.

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<sup>89</sup> Crispian Balmer and Giselda Vagnoni, "Cornered by Draghi, Italy's Salvini Shifts His Party out of Far-Right Camp," Reuters (Thomson Reuters, February 10, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-politics-league-analysis/cornered-by-draghi-italys-salvini-shifts-his-party-out-of-far-right-camp-idUSKBN2AA1DO>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid

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